Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service

Community Risk Management Planning (CRMP) Engagement 2023

Report of findings

Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service

Community Risk Management Planning (CRMP) Engagement 2023

Opinion Research Services

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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS) on the five engagement focus groups reported here. The diverse participants engaged with the issues and discussed their ideas readily, so we trust that this report of findings will help to inform service planning.

We thank MFRS for commissioning the project as part of its on-going regular programme of public and stakeholder engagement and consultation about its risk management and budget planning.

We particularly thank the senior officers and staff who attended the sessions to listen to the public's views and answer questions. Such meetings benefit considerably from their readiness to answer participants' questions fully and frankly, as in this case.

We are grateful to all the 74 members of the public who took part in the five meetings to share their views with us: they were patient in listening to important and detailed background information before entering positively into open discussions about challenging topics.

At all stages of the project, ORS's status as an independent organisation engaging with the public as fairly as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will contribute usefully to thinking about future service delivery.

1. Key Findings

Key engagement findings

MFRS's planning principles were largely considered appropriate, but some changes and additions were suggested

1.1 The consensus was that MFRS's 'Planning Principles' remain appropriate overall, but there was support for amending or removing the one that reads 'keep fire stations open using different duty systems rather than close stations.' This was now considered irrelevant in light of fire station mergers in several areas, which have had a positive effect on response times, staff working environments, and efficiency.

1.2 While avoiding compulsory redundancies where possible was considered important still, this priority - which was developed at a time of austerity and service cuts - was thought to be 'of its time' and no longer needed given MFRS is now building its capacity once more.

1.3 In terms of potential additions, principles around staff mental health and wellbeing, workforce diversity, and employee relations/business continuity were suggested.

MFRS's 'proposals' were generally supported, some more than others

1.4 In terms of MFRS's 'proposals', there were very high levels of agreement with the Service considering the following for inclusion in its CRMP 2024-27:

Keeping fire engines 'on the run' by crewing them with three firefighters to non-life risk incidents until four firefighters become available through overtime or moves from other stations (99%).

Targeting Prevention work toward those most likely to die in a fire and the areas of highest deprivation (97%).

Working in areas of higher risk to educate and inform the communities in those areas on known and foreseeable risk and the actions they can take to make themselves safer (97%).

Using the new Training and Development Academy for national and international training, subject to requests, with any funding raised redirected to benefit Merseyside communities (97%).

Increasing fire engine numbers from 32 to 34 to increase resilience for high demand periods (94%).

Continuing to assist the NWAS in relation to cardiac response and expanding this to people who have had falls (93%).

Further enhancing Protection staffing to do more proactive enforcement work, particularly by introducing a building safety regulator (90%).

1.5 Support was slightly lower, but still strong, for MFRS reintroducing a Small Fires Unit to help when there are large numbers of lower level (not life-risk) (88%); using improved technology in its Control Room (88%); and enhancing water rescue capabilities through introducing either a sub-surface drone or a diving team (85%).

1.6 There was least agreement (69%) with MFRS using its Watch Managers differently to carry out different duties that add value and respond to incidents in a different way, mainly as participants were unsure about the current role of a Watch Manager and what any changes might mean in practice.

2. The Engagement Process

Overview of the engagement

Background to the review

2.1 'Community Risk Management' is the development of a balanced approach by Fire and Rescue Services to reducing risk within the community. This is achieved by combining Prevention, Protection and Emergency Response, on a risk-assessed basis, in order to improve the safety of the community and create a safer working environment for firefighters.

2.2 In 2020/21, Merseyside Fire & Rescue Authority (MFRA) developed and consulted on its most recent Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) for 2021-24, which was subsequently approved. The Service is now beginning to develop its Plan for 2024-27 (renamed the Community Risk Management Plan or CRMP) and is seeking input from a range of stakeholders on how it might provide fire and rescue services during this period.

The commission

2.3 Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research - was appointed to convene, facilitate and report five online focus groups with members of the public, one in each of the five areas of Merseyside (Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens and Wirral). Pre-consultation listening and engagement and formal consultation meetings have been undertaken with residents across Merseyside on a regular cycle; and in this context ORS has facilitated both district-based and all-Merseyside focus groups for the Service for many years.

Deliberative engagement

Focus groups

2.4 The focus group meetings reported here used a 'deliberative' approach that encouraged members of the public to reflect in depth about MFRS's proposed direction of travel while both receiving and questioning extensive background information. The fact that the groups were part of an 'early-stage engagement' rather than 'formal consultation' process was stressed: participants were told they would be 'testing' MFRS's ideas for how it might provide services over the lifetime of its next CRMP, rather than discussing any firm proposals.

2.5 The meetings, which were held face-to-face at local community fire stations, lasted for around two hours and in total there were 74 diverse participants. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public at each focus group are as shown in the table overleaf.

FOCUS GROUP	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Knowsley **Prescot Community Fire Station**	**9th October 2023**	**19**
Wirral **Birkenhead Community Fire Station**	**10th October 2023**	**14**
Liverpool **Kirkdale Community Fire Station**	**11th October 2023**	**13**
St Helens **St Helens Community Fire Station**	**18th October 2023**	**13**
Sefton **Bottle & Netherton Community Fire Station**	**19th October 2023**	**15**

2.6 The attendance target for each of the focus groups was 12-15 people – so the total of 74 participants was on-target. Around two-thirds of participants had participated in one or more previous ORS-run MFRA forums or focus groups; the others were 'fresh' recruits.

2.7 Previous participants were recruited through random-digit telephone dialling from the ORS Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, all participants were then written to - to confirm the invitation and the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or email reminders shortly before each meeting. New participants were recruited by Acumen Field, a specialist recruitment agency, who initially sent out a screening questionnaire as an online survey to a database of contacts and, more widely, on social media platforms. They then collated the responses to establish a pool of potential recruits, which was 'sifted' to establish a contact list. People were then contacted by telephone, asked to complete a more detailed screening questionnaire and either recruited or not to match the required quotas. Those recruited were sent all the necessary details in a confirmation email and telephoned a day or two before the events to confirm their attendance.

2.8 In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors. The recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria including, for example: gender; age; working status; and disability/limiting long-term illness (LLTI). Overall, as demonstrated in the table below, participants represented a broad cross-section of residents – and as standard good practice, people were recompensed for their time and efforts in and taking part.

GENDER	AGE	WORKING STATUS	LIMITING ILLNESS OR DISABILITY	ETHNIC GROUP
Male: 35 Female: 39	16-34: 19 35-54: 33 55+: 22	Working full- or part-time: 46 Not working/ retired: 28	15	White British: 68 Ethnic minority: 6

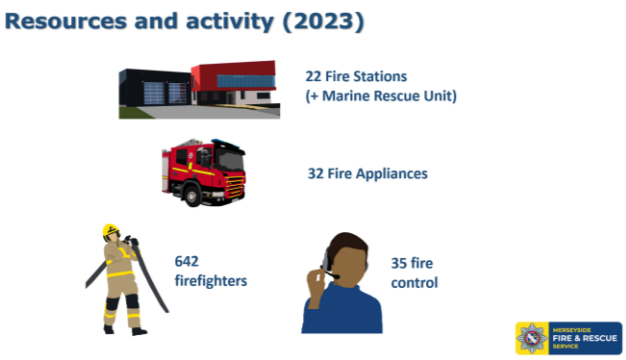
2.9 Although, like all other forms of qualitative engagement, deliberative focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse members of the public the opportunity to participate actively. Because the meetings were inclusive, the outcomes are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

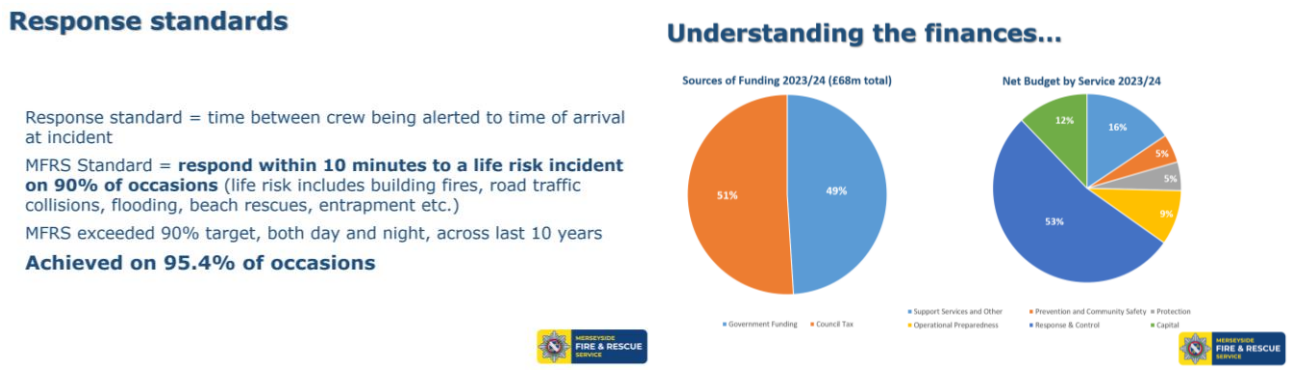
The agenda

2.10 The focus groups began with an ORS presentation to provide some contextual background information around Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS)'s purpose and vision; the reasons for the engagement; and the Service's resources and activity, response standards, and finances. The slides used to outline this information can be seen below and overleaf.



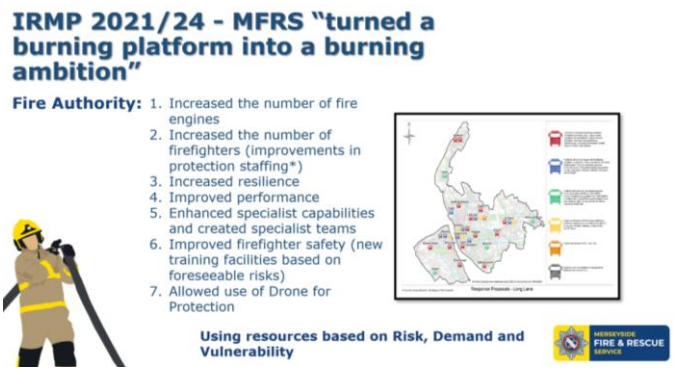


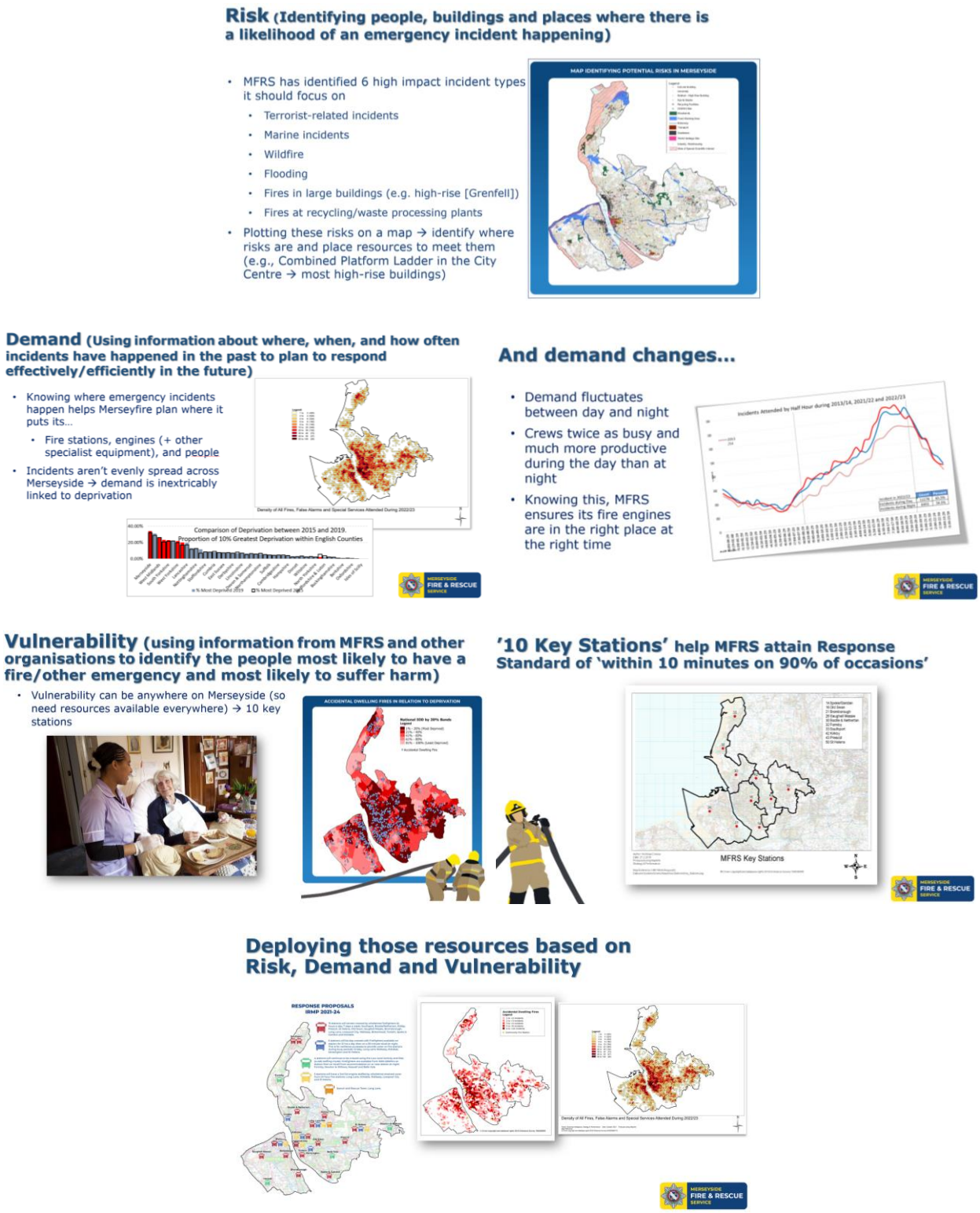




2.11 Participants were also informed about MFRS's projected financial challenges, and the ways in which it has been able to overcome these during the lifetime of the last IRMP, including by using its resources based on risk, demand, and vulnerability.







2.12 The subsequent discussion then covered whether MFRS's Planning Principles are still appropriate; and the Service's ideas for how it plans to provide services over the lifetime of its forthcoming CRMP. Participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout, and the meetings were thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.

The report

2.13 This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of respondents and participants on how MFRS might deliver its services in future. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them - but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of view. ORS does not endorse any opinions but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. The report is an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants.

3. Focus Group Findings

Detailed engagement findings

Introduction

3.1 This chapter reports the views from five deliberative face-to-face focus groups with members of the public across Merseyside, which were independently facilitated by ORS.

3.2 The meeting format followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under consideration. A series of information slides were shared at set points during the sessions, which ensured that participants had sufficient background information to actively deliberate on the proposals. The meetings were thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.

3.3 In order to quantify views on the main engagement issues, participants were given a workbook in which they could record their responses to key questions. Responses to these were captured and are reported in this chapter, but it is important to note that this was a qualitative research exercise and the numerical findings from the polls are not statistically valid.

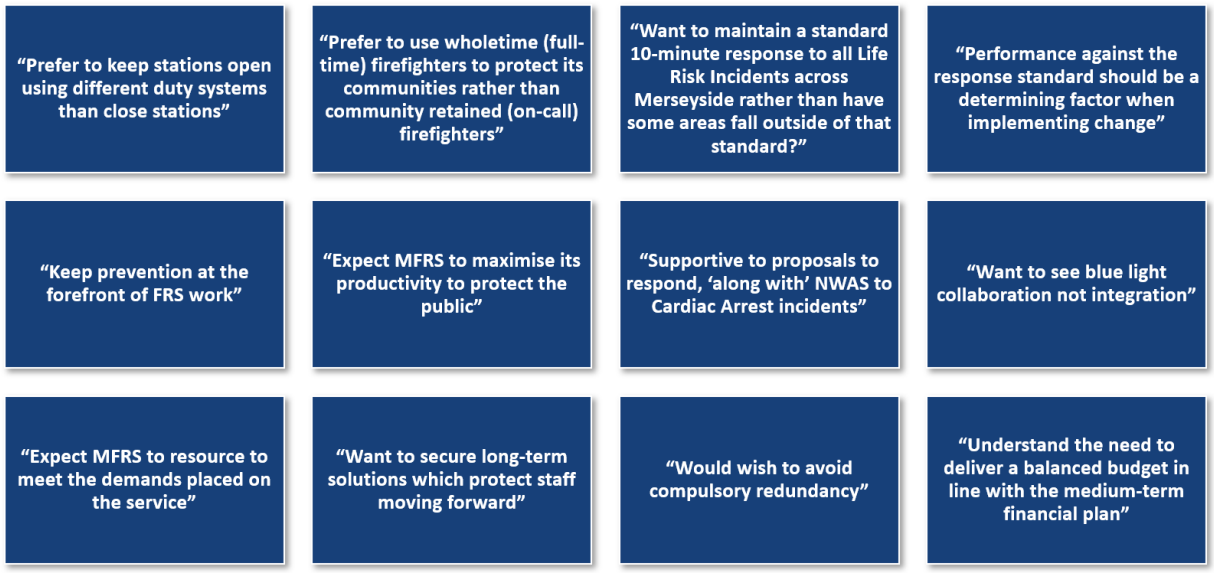
3.4 This is not a verbatim transcript of the five sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions - and as the focus groups did not differ materially in their reactions to the proposals, this report combines the findings from all the meetings in a single account.

Main findings

MFRS's planning principles were largely considered appropriate, but some changes and additions were suggested

3.5 Prior to the first group discussion exercise, participants were shown the MFRS 'Planning Principles' overleaf (as developed through consultation with members of the public and the Fire Authority over many years) and asked whether they remain appropriate.

MFRS also needs to understand what's important to the public...



3.6 There was either unanimous or almost unanimous support for retaining the following principles:

Want to maintain a standard 10-minute response to all Life Risk Incidents across Merseyside rather than have some areas fall outside of that standard.

Performance against the response standard should be a determining factor in implementing change.

Keep prevention at the forefront of FRS work

Want to secure long-term solutions which protect staff moving forward.

Expect MFRS to maximise its productivity to protect the public.

Expect MFRS to resource to meet the demands placed on the service.

Understand the need to deliver a balanced budget in line with the medium-term financial plan.

> *"The main thing that stands out … The prevention up there near the top. Obviously keeping it within the 10-minute response is very important as well …" (St Helens)*

3.7 While generally supported still, there was discussion and disagreement around some other principles. For example, while most participants expressed a preference for blue light collaboration over integration, a few suggested consideration be given to the latter (like the North American models).

> *"… I fall on the side of integration. I know in the States they have paramedics on the fire tender so if they go to say a bad smash, the paramedic is there at exactly the same time as the fire service rather than waiting for a paramedic car to join them … It could save seconds, it could save minutes, it could save lives" (Liverpool)*

"I'm really impressed with how the Fire Service is run, the response times etc. so I feel it should be a model for the other emergency services. So I would like it to go beyond collaboration into integration" (Sefton)

3.8 Most, though, preferred to retain the three distinct services, not least for fear that MFRS would end up 'propping up' North West Ambulance Service (NWAS) and Merseyside Police; two services that are currently under extreme operational pressure. This was an issue also raised directly in the context of MFRS responding 'along with' NWAS to cardiac arrest incidents.

"… The blue light collaboration … can be a positive thing, but we are also a bit concerned that maybe the Fire Service have got their stuff together and maybe some of the other services haven't so much. So, we have reservations that Merseyfire might be being used to prop up some of the partnerships. Collaboration in theory fine but not using to mask other people's budgets or problems ..." (St Helens)

3.9 On the issue of collaboration, there was significant support for shared facilities (one station housing fire and rescue, ambulance and police services for example) and joint training and learning exercises.

"One stop shop! Fire/police/ambulance" (Liverpool)

"Send response staff to see how police and ambulance response staff work and gain a better understanding to improve collaboration" (Wirral)

3.10 While the principle of using of wholetime (full-time) firefighters to protect Merseyside's communities rather than community retained (on-call) firefighters was, overall, still considered relevant, there was some discussion at the Liverpool focus group around whether the latter would be preferable from a health and safety perspective.

"… If there are people who are maybe on shift 12 hours and then are obviously tired, but then get the call to go back in to work … Do you want somebody like that, or do you want somebody who has maybe been in a pen pushing job for the day but equally won't have that experience?"

3.11 It was ultimately agreed, though, that using community retained firefighters could carry the same risk if a person's 'day job' involves long hours and/or physicality, and that MFRS can retain a higher degree of control by using its wholetime firefighters for on-call cover.

3.12 The most disagreement was reserved for two principles in particular: preferring to keep stations open using different duty systems than close stations; and wishing to avoid compulsory redundancy. The former was now considered irrelevant in light of fire station mergers in several areas, which have had no detrimental impact on service provision. In fact, they were recognised as having made improvements not only to response times, but also staff working environments and efficiency.

"The super stations make a lot of sense to get a lot of people in the same place ... As long as it's central to where the two stations were, and as long as you have the same level of staff, if not more, and the same amount of safety gear and then you are cutting down on costs of electricity and you have that money to use elsewhere. Then as long as you have the same amount, if not more, of fire engines then it makes a lot of sense to close stations" (Wirral)

"… with the closures you've been able to reduce some of the times to respond, so I think that's the one that we think would be less relevant now compared to the others" (St Helens)

"… This is the first time that I've ever set foot in a fire station so to me as long it met the actual standard of getting the response out and getting the fire engine there, I don't think it really matters where the station actually is to the public … People want to know the response time is going to be the same. I don't think the building matters that much really" (Liverpool)

3.13 It was said, though, that views on fire station closures and mergers might differ by area. For example, one Sefton resident highlighted the relative isolation of Southport Fire Station, stating that: *"I tended to agree with keeping fire stations open because I live in Southport and we're out on a limb and we want to keep that station open. But I do fully understand the benefit of building mega stations where fire stations aren't fit for purpose and where you can improve response times and coverage." (Sefton)*

3.14 While avoiding compulsory redundancies where possible was considered important still, this priority - which was developed at a time of austerity and service cuts - was thought to be 'of its time' and no longer needed given MFRS is now building its capacity once more. Furthermore, it was said that compulsory redundancy is a reality for many organisations and businesses in certain circumstances, and that it should be considered if it is in their best interests.

"The 'wish to avoid compulsory redundancies' one … that doesn't feel relevant any more if you're looking to increase resources" (Knowsley)

"Compulsory redundancy … depends on circumstances and has to be about the service delivery and the standard response times" (Liverpool)

3.15 In light of this, it was widely agreed that this priority should be removed, with one Liverpool participant suggesting that: *"You've already got one saying, 'Want to secure long-term solutions which protect staff moving forward' which we would generally agree with, so we feel like you don't need both of them there." (Liverpool)*

3.16 In terms of potential additions, the following were suggested:

Staff wellbeing/mental health	• *"Work-life balance, mental health, firefighters' wellbeing" (Wirral)* • *"If firefighters get called out to a big scene with fatalities … mentally and emotionally it must be hard ... It's that mental health and wellbeing aspect of it, which is just as important as their physical wellbeing …" (Knowsley)* • *"More importance to staff wellbeing and morale" (St Helens)*
Workforce diversity	• *"There is nothing about diversity in it. I work in a college and I think the work of a firefighter is still perceived as that of a white man and there is no mention of multi-culturalism" (Wirral)*
Employee relations	• *"Is there something about employee relations? There's a lot of strikes happening at the moment, so something around business continuity and protecting the Service if you did have a walk out …"* (Knowsley)

3.17 There was also some discussion at St Helens about positive promotion of MFRS and its achievements, and whether this could be incorporated into the principles in some way.

> *"… We don't know the good you do unless it's for us personally … In my whole lifetime, I don't know anything (unless I've witnessed it, or it's been personal to me) about what you have done … I think maybe the press aren't interested in a good news story, but I think that there could be more use of social media, more use of the good stories about things. If we are the gold standard of the fire service, that's something to be really proud of in Merseyside. There are so many bad news stories about Merseyside, it's nice to have something that we are really good at"*

MFRS's 'proposals' were generally supported, some more than others

3.18 Participants were informed that if possible and financially viable, MFRS is considering:

Increasing its fire engines from 32 to 34 to increase resilience for high demand periods.

Reintroducing a Small Fires Unit (crewed by three firefighters) to help when there are large numbers of lower level (not life-risk) incidents, freeing up traditional fire engines for bigger and life-risk incidents.

Keeping fire engines 'on the run' by crewing them with three firefighters to non-life risk incidents (until four firefighters become available through overtime or an additional firefighter being moved from another station).

Enhancing its water rescue capability through introducing either a sub-surface drone or a diving team.

Using improved technology in its Control Room such as 'Enhanced Mobilisation' (pre-alerting fire engines), 'Aura' (dynamic mapping of fire engines using Automatic Vehicle Location) and '999Eye'.

Using its Watch Managers differently to carry out different duties that add value and respond to incidents in a different way.

Working in areas of higher risk to educate and inform the communities in those areas on known and foreseeable risk (e.g., flooding and wildfire) and the actions they can take to make themselves safer

Continuing to assist the NWAS in relation to cardiac response and expanding this to people who have had falls (where the likelihood would be that an ambulance would not respond for over six hours).

Targeting its Prevention work toward those most likely to die in a fire and the areas of highest deprivation; where smoke alarm ownership is lowest and accidental dwelling fires are at their highest.

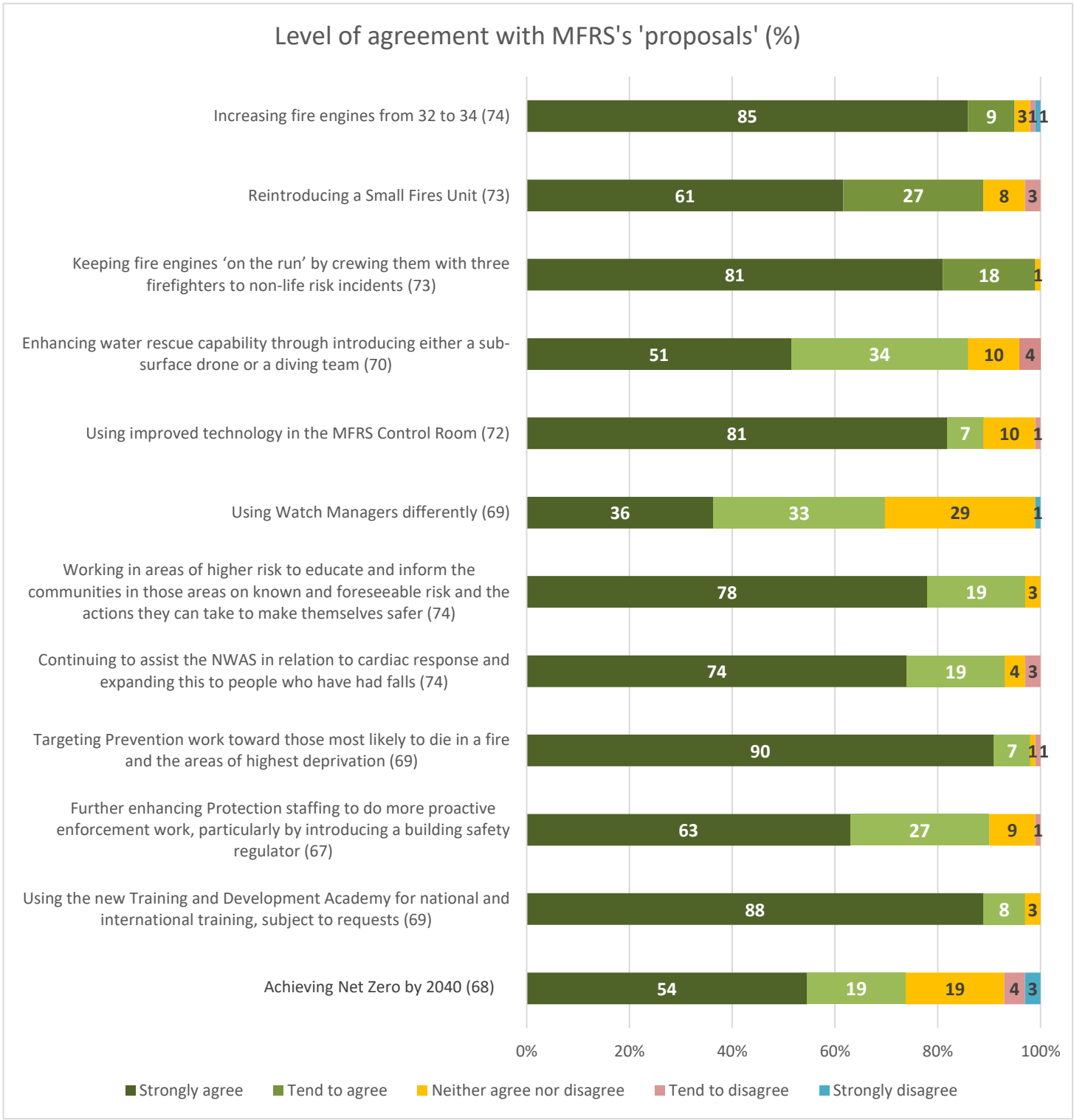
Further enhancing its Protection staffing to do more proactive enforcement work, particularly by introducing a building safety regulator.

Using its new Training and Development Academy for national and international training, subject to requests, with any funding raised redirected to benefit Merseyside communities.

Achieve Net Zero by 2040.

3.19 Worksheets were used to determine levels of agreement or otherwise with MFRS's considerations. The results from these can be seen in Figure 1, and the comments made on each of the proposals in the worksheets and in discussion follow.

Figure 1: Extent of agreement with MFRS's 'proposals' (percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding)



Numbers of responses in brackets following the 'proposal'

Increasing fire engines from 32 to 34

3.20 The prospect of increasing the number of MFRS fire engines from 32 to 34 was almost universally supported on the grounds of efficiency and resilience, and to help maintain the 10-minute response standard, especially during periods of high demand.

> *"More resources equals a more effective service" (Knowsley)*
>
> *"More engines can only be a good thing. In the event of an emergency (e.g., Manchester bombing), getting enough engines there ASAP is crucial" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"Enhancing services to be able to cope with high demand" (Sefton)*
>
> *"Always good to have more engines on the road to fill gaps in service" (St Helens)*
>
> *"This will increase effectiveness/improve response time. If advertised, increased public assurance" (Sefton)*

3.21 Participants also referenced population expansion and increasing incident trends because of, for example, climate change and viewed an increase in the number of appliances as MFRS resourcing to meet its demand. This is, of course, one of the principles discussed earlier.

> *"In my opinion, we need as many fire engines as possible because the population in our area is growing all the time" (Wirral)*
>
> *"The incident trend shows increased numbers of call outs, so that suggests more demand. It's resourcing to that demand" (Knowsley)*
>
> *"The data irrespective of deprivation plus increase of incidents (weather etc.) combined with increased civil unrest (global stage) means that it is essential that MFRS is resourced" (St Helens)*

3.22 Those who were less positive about increasing fire engine numbers primarily questioned the need for, and cost/benefit of, additional resources given response time standards are being well met currently.

> *"I would need convincing that increasing from 32 to 34 fire engines would have a significant increase on the impact of your response times" (Wirral)*
>
> *"The results and the stations response times are already very good – maintaining this should be key, but other opportunities may be better to prioritise" (St Helens)*

3.23 There were also some concerns about being able to staff the extra resources, and it was suggested that specialist appliances be factored into any decision-making around service provision.

> *"We need to look at the specialist areas with any increase in appliances, like better response to floods (not just in dock area) and new risks (e.g., electric vehicle fires)" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"How would you be able to staff the extra two engines? Where would they be based?" (Sefton)*

Reintroducing a Small Fires Unit

3.24 Reintroducing a small fires unit was, for many participants, a way of providing a more dynamic, flexible, and efficient service. In particular, they were pleased with the prospect of reducing pressure on the Service during busy periods and freeing up larger appliances for life-threatening incidents.

> *"Potential cost savings and more accessible" (Knowsley)*
>
> *"Previous experience of this working well. Now that there is room to reintroduce, it's a more efficient use of resources" (Wirral)*
>
> *"Small fires don't need a full crew; waste of resources" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"… Where I live, there is always a lot of kids being idiots, setting things on fire and stuff like that. You don't need five firefighters going to that; that could be done by a Small Fires Unit quite quickly in comparison to having a full engine with five people on it …" (St Helens)*
>
> *"Having a fire unit dealing with smaller fires again must reduce cost enabling larger teams vehicles to deal with major incidents" (Sefton)*

3.25 There was some concern, though, about potential incident escalation and the ability of smaller crews to deal with situations that are more serious than anticipated. Several participants also asked questions around how the unit would be staffed (and in this context, the Sefton group asked whether it might be feasible to crew a smaller vehicle with two rather than three firefighters).

> *"There's the issue of maybe not knowing it's a life risk incident until the fire and rescue service gets there" (Knowsley)*
>
> *"My doubt at this stage is the ability to receive accurate information about the incident … You're relying on 100% accuracy of the emergency call coming in. That someone has correctly identified it as a small fire. How do you know it won't have escalated by the time you get there?" (Sefton)*
>
> *"It makes sense to use proportionate resources. However, I would expect some agreement with staff and community as per what is a small fire" (St Helens)*
>
> *"Why do you need a third person? Could you reduce it to two for the smaller incidents?" (Sefton)*

3.26 If MFRS is to reintroduce a small fires unit, its cost-effectiveness would, it was felt, have to be monitored. Indeed, one Sefton participant suggested a trial period with quarterly reviews to establish success or otherwise.

> *"If the evidence supports the idea of it being cost effective and valuable in saving property" (Wirral)*

Keeping fire engines 'on the run' by crewing them with three firefighters to non-life risk incidents

3.27 This 'proposal' was considered a sensible use of resources by most participants across the five groups. Indeed, several questioned why it is not in place already.

> *"This sounds like a no brainer to me!" (St Helens)*
>
> *"I would suggest this should be happening already as a good use of resource and facilities. I believe this is a high priority that would advantage all groups" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"Makes sense to keep all fire engines 'on the run' and for a three-manned engine to attend a small non-life risk incident; keeping the fully manned engine for the life risk incidents" (Wirral)*
>
> *"Allows small fires to be dealt with without taking focus away from life threatening fires" (St Helens)*

3.28 In the context of cost-effectiveness, many participants across all five groups said that in an either/or situation, they would prefer MFRS to take this option forward over the small fires unit given it would not involve expenditure on a dedicated vehicle. Some disagreed, though, citing the higher running costs of a larger appliance.

> *"… If you can use the big engine and the three people, then why do you want to spend lots and lots of money on buying something else?" (Wirral)*
>
> *"This seems like a more cost-effective way of achieving some of the same results" (St Helens)*
>
> *"Large units must be much more costly to run for small incidents" (St Helens)*

3.29 It was recognised that implementing crews of three for non-life-threatening incidents would likely require staff and union agreement, as well as careful management to ensure overall resilience. Participants also sought reassurance that this would not become the 'norm', and again expressed some concern about the potential for incidents to be larger than originally anticipated.

> *"The resource is currently being wasted. Agreement about what would be covered by engines staffed at four or five and staffed by three would be needed" (St Helens)*
>
> *"Would need to be carefully managed and have a maximum number of three-man appliances" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"Unpredictable severity of callouts; you may need four firefighters" (Knowsley)*
>
> *"As long as it doesn't become the norm to send crews of three out instead of four" (Knowsley)*

Enhancing water rescue capability through introducing either a sub-surface drone or a diving team

3.30 Water rescue was considered an essential aspect of MFRS's work, given Merseyside's coastal location and the dangers of the River Mersey.

> *"I don't think people realise how much activity goes on in that river. People just see the Service as putting out fires and rescuing people but the river is a big part of it too. And it's a different beast …" (Knowsley)*

"I think this should be the case in a coastal region with an extensive dock system" (Liverpool)

"Merseyside is a 'high water area' so yes" (Sefton)

3.31 One St Helens participants also stressed that: *"… There is no other alternative for the marine life-saving incidents so if you don't look at providing some kind of solution there … For the others, there are alternatives, there are other ways of reacting and getting to those incidents. For that, there isn't really so for me that's why it probably should be a priority." (St Helens)*

3.32 Though there was some support for a sub-surface drone, there were also concerns about its potential cost and that it could become 'out of date' fairly quickly given the progression of technology. As such, given MFRS's budgetary constraints, more participants said they would be in favour of upskilling the existing marine rescue team than supported the purchase of a drone.

"Would certainly be great to have but appreciate costs/budgets need to be considered" (St Helens)

"I don't know about the drone business and the cost of it. It's a lot of money isn't it? How often do you use the drone? Also, in no time at all, technology like that is out of date" (Wirral)

"… For the amount of money a drone would cost and for where it's going to get to, would it be a better use of the resource to just make sure there was more training for firefighters having the diving capabilities… ? (St Helens)

"… Will the drone be out of date in two years? Is it better to have a physical team that can keep up to date alongside the technology?" (Liverpool)

3.33 Regardless of what is decided, participants in all focus groups strongly urged MFRS to explore sharing resources with Merseyside Police, who already have a diving team in place for body recovery.

"Liaise with police sub-aqua teams rather than one group rescues and the other retrieves bodies" (Wirral)

"I think this is a prime area for blue light collaboration: to share costs, equipment and expertise" (Sefton)

"… You said the police already had a diving team that are used for cadavers. Is there anything there that could be worked with the police as a joint diving unit instead?" (St Helens)

3.34 Moreover, one St Helens participant suggested the MFRS could use any income from its new training and development academy to further partnership working in this area, as well as undertake more prevention and community education around water safety.

Using improved technology in the MFRS Control Room, such as 'Enhanced Mobilisation', 'Aura', and '999Eye'

3.35 Participants were almost unanimously in favour of MFRS using whatever technology it has at its disposal to make its operations more streamlined and effective. The general sense was that this would allow the Service to make gains in a cost-efficient way.

> *"OMG! This is fantastic. Needs to be done NOW" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"Technology has helped us progress in so many sectors so something like this is lifesaving. I think a big focus on this area should be happening. This seems like a higher priority for funding than things like a drone" (Wirral)*
>
> *"… It should be absolutely considered because I think very quickly you can fall behind on technology if you don't keep up with it ... In any kind of emergency situation, it always should be, 'What's the latest technology, let's make sure we are taking advantage of it' … Technology can be expensive, but compared to some of the other costs that you guys have its relatively low cost I would suggest" (St Helens)*
>
> *"To take advantage of technological advances to enhance response and service is a good strategy" (Sefton)*
>
> *"Technology is the silent resource. Only initial cost, then maintenance" (Sefton)*

3.36 The use of enhanced mobilisation via a pre-alert system was particularly praised for its potential to improve response times.

> *"The use of better technology would seemingly improve response times to the benefit of the community" (St Helens)*
>
> *"If there is sufficient funding, this is a great idea. Alerting fire engines earlier would always be useful" (Sefton)*

3.37 Participants also liked the idea of 999Eye to aid the control centre in its decision-making around the type and level of response required at an incident, though it was suggested that some people may have concerns about privacy that would need to be addressed.

> *"The way technology is going now, 999Eye should become a thing, so firefighters know what they are going into, how they're going to respond before getting to a scene blind? Obviously, people can describe on the phone, but if you've got that visual image, it's going to help. It's not going to be a negative effect" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"Do you think people might not be as keen on the app because of privacy concerns. We know our phones are listening to us but actually taking control of the phone; that would make it feel real!" (Sefton)*

3.38 There was some concern, based on media reports of 'wastage' in other public services, that systems may not prove as cost-effective as initially thought, and a few Liverpool participants questioned the value of

making huge investments in new technology for marginal gains. Furthermore, several people worried about possible technological failures, and that automation should not be at the expense of 'actual people'.

> *"Using the NHS as an example, spending millions on new IT systems that don't work … It's only a good idea if it's going to give you something you haven't already got. You're pretty effective now, so there's a danger you could be spending a fortune for only a small percentage improvement" (Knowsley)*
>
> *"Technology is always good, but not a replacement for hands on pump" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"This sounds like an excellent idea, particularly 999Eye. However, my concerns would be what would happen if the technology failed" (St Helens)*

Using Watch Managers to carry out different duties that add value and respond to incidents in a different way

3.39 Exploring ways of using Watch Managers differently was described as a means of working smarter and more efficiently and effectively.

> *"Again seems a way to work smarter, not necessarily harder" (Sefton)*
>
> *"It seems to be a very good idea to review people's job responsibilities from time to time" (Wirral)*
>
> *"It could allow a better response to be effected, possibly through earlier arrival of the Watch Manager to assess the required nature of action" (St Helens)*
>
> *"The Watch Manager could use his/her time more effectively and respond to two separate fire engines without coming back with the engine" (Sefton)*

3.40 Offering Watch Managers more responsibility and associated recognition and reward was also thought to be potentially beneficial in terms of job satisfaction and retention. However, there was some worry about the possibility of individuals being given too much responsibility, leading to competing priorities and to the detriment of service provision.

> *"Need to ensure this doesn't result in competing priorities and demands on their time … That could be a disadvantage for either them or their staff" (Liverpool)*

3.41 It should be noted that this was the 'proposal' that received most 'neither agree nor disagree' responses, which perhaps reflects the fact that participants were unsure about the current role of a Watch Manager and what any changes might mean in practice,

> *"Too vague; no real explanation" (Wirral)*
>
> *"Unsure on this matter as I don't fully understand the role" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"Open to new ways of working but I would want more details to consider properly" (St Helens)*

Working in areas of higher risk to educate and inform the communities in those areas on known and foreseeable risk (e.g., flooding and wildfire) and the actions they can take to make themselves safer

3.42 Prevention and education was thought to be vital in reducing risk and incident levels, and cost-effective in the long-term. As such, providing communities with as much information as possible about the known and foreseeable risks they face and ways to mitigate against them was strongly supported, particularly in the context of climate change and associated events like flooding and wildfires.

> *"I think this is a good idea, certain areas require different solutions/approaches" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"Prevention over intervention where possible. Focus on young ages. If people can identify risks then they can report it" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"Education and informative information given to communities is vital to spread awareness to the public … Ways to be aware of foreseeable risks and ways to approach them would be helpful" (Sefton)*
>
> *"The effects of climate change are becoming more apparent" (Wirral)*
>
> *"In terms of climate change education, it's essential" (St Helens)*

3.43 Working in partnership to maximise the success of this work was suggested, however.

> *"Proportionate and targeted use of resources, but … perhaps via partnerships to achieve education" (St Helens)*

Continuing to assist the NWAS in relation to cardiac response and expanding this to people who have had falls

3.44 Many participants were happy to support the expansion of MFRS assistance to NWAS to include people who have had falls, providing firefighters do not become replacements for paramedics and that it is not at the expense of the Service's core functions.

> *"If crew are skilled and able, it makes sense to utilise the staff and vehicles if they are available" (Wirral)*
>
> *"Anything that will decrease the waiting times for calls will help and is much needed" (Sefton)*
>
> *"Providing this is not replacing the ambulance service, it is better to have a firefighter helping to save lives rather than a person lose their life" (Wirral)*
>
> *"If it has no impact on other services within fire and rescue" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"This sounds great in theory, as long as it didn't take away staff from serious incidents" (St Helens)*

3.45 Those who opposed or had significant concerns about the expansion did not see this as the fire and rescue service's role. They instead called for investment into NWAS and were concerned that this would not be forthcoming for as long as its activity is 'patched up' by MFRS.

> *"Removes urgency to reform and increase funding for health service" (Liverpool)*

"Offering that assistance; there's no downside to that. But I do feel that North West Ambulance Service should be looking at investing in their own equivalent of a 'small fires unit' for this …" (Sefton)

"Open to resources being used when not otherwise engaged, but I am concerned that this will be relied on by other agencies who are getting funded for such response … It should be used to support not to patch up the ambulance service" (St Helens)

Targeting Prevention work toward those most likely to die in a fire and the areas of highest deprivation

3.46 Once again, prevention and education was considered key to reducing risk and saving lives, and it was typically considered imperative that activity is targeted toward those who will benefit most from it.

"Concentrating on areas of high risk is important" (Sefton)

"Proportionate and targeted use of resources; makes sense" (St Helens)

"Education is key. Deprivation is no excuse for loss of life" (Wirral)

3.47 Of particular concern was the low smoke alarm ownership in some areas. This, it was felt, must be addressed through education and the provision of free alarms to those in need of them.

"So important for people to have fire alarms and be educated on why." (Wirral)

"Smoke alarms should be a legal requirement and made accessible in deprived areas." (Liverpool)

Further enhancing Protection staffing to do more proactive enforcement work, particularly by introducing a building safety regulator

3.48 This was considered essential by most in ensuring buildings are as safe as possible and preventing another disaster like that at Grenfell Tower. In particular, it was felt that a building safety regulator could be valuable in identifying issues and trends of concern at an early stage and working with building owners and responsible persons to address them.

"All about education. Proactive always over reactive" (Liverpool)

"Important for prevention, so if an enforcement officer deems a place unsafe then it's vital everything gets sorted quickly to avoid incidents" (Wirral)

"Reducing the risk areas can only improve the environment" (St Helens)

3.49 A minority, though, did not consider this to be a fire and rescue service responsibility.

"Don't think this should be your responsibility … Too many buildings and owners not providing safe housing/buildings" (St Helens)

Using the new Training and Development Academy for national and international training, subject to requests

3.50 Using the new Training and Development Academy for national and international training was supported as a means of raising revenue to cover its costs and raising the profile of MFRS both within the UK and worldwide.

> *"Appears to be highly innovative and a further worthwhile revenue stream that will improve the profile of MFRS" (Wirral)*
>
> *"Good for keeping the skills of the service up-to-date and raising the status of Merseyside and for raising funding for local projects" (Wirral)*
>
> *"Any opportunity for MFRS to wave their flag is supported. It can only benefit Merseyside" (St Helens)*
>
> *"Let us be a beacon … and a good source of funding" (Sefton)*

3.51 One Sefton participant also said that: *"… Wherever there is an earthquake or something bad, international rescue go out and the British fire service, they are renowned throughout the world. If we can get people from other countries to come here to train at the same level then there might not be the need for that straight away … It would just be fantastic."*

Achieving Net Zero by 2040

3.52 Although not strictly a 'proposal', participants were asked whether they supported MFRS's aim to achieve Net Zero by 2040. Most people recognised that this is something MFRS must strive for morally, operationally, and to meet Government targets.

> *"… The world is burning and MFRS needs to be at the forefront of reducing this" (Wirral)*
>
> *"Of course! Global warming contributes to extra fires" (St Helens)*
>
> *"Public services should lead the way" (St Helens)*
>
> *"Everybody needs to reduce their carbon footprint" (Sefton)*

3.53 Those who were less positive acknowledged the need to address the climate emergency, but not at any cost or at the expense of safety. In light of the latter, several Liverpool participants were concerned that the relevant technology is not yet reliable enough to ensure Net Zero can be safely achieved.

> *"Don't feel the technology is available to support this despite the climate requiring it" (Liverpool)*
>
> *"The technology needs to be right. We cannot compromise safety unless the technology is in place" (Liverpool)*

3.54 A small minority disagreed that MFRS should strive for Net Zero mainly due to their own lack of interest in the issue.

Overall comments

3.55 In considering the first of the two main discussion issues, MFRS's planning principles, it would seem sensible to retain most 'as they are', while removing those relating to avoiding station closures and compulsory redundancies. Replacements could incorporate staff mental health and wellbeing, workforce diversity, and employee relations/business continuity.

3.56 As for the Service's 'proposals', participants generally agreed that they should all be at least considered for inclusion in the forthcoming CRMP for 2024-2027; while also recognising that budgetary constraints would prevent MFRS from implementing each one. In light of this, they did consider some 'trade offs'. For example, there was a preference for using a traditional fire engine crewed by three participants over a dedicated small fires unit for non-life risk incidents, and for upskilling a diving team over purchasing a sub-surface drone. There was, however, significant trust that the Service will make the right decisions in the best interests of the people of Merseyside.